

**'Dominance, defence and diminishing returns'?**  
**Theresa May's Leadership Capital July 2016 to July 2018**

**Ben Worthy**

Department of Politics

Birkbeck College

University of London

[b.worthy@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:b.worthy@bbk.ac.uk)

**Mark Bennister**

School of Social and Political Sciences

University of Lincoln

[mbennister@lincoln.ac.uk](mailto:mbennister@lincoln.ac.uk)

**Abstract:**

Theresa May's first two years in office illustrate Anthony King's (1991) observation that premierships can vary within themselves. Her premiership divides into two distinct phases, before and after the snap general election of June 2017, with a final coda after July 2017 when her premiership unravelled. Whilst the disastrous election looked like the crucial event, analysis using the Leadership Capital Index (LCI) suggests that, contrary to popular assumptions, before the election May was weaker than she appeared and afterwards not quite as diminished as assumed. The LCI analysis we present here (focusing on the year before and the year after the 2017 general election) shows that May's capital fell, but not as far as presented by prevailing narratives. May went from being, in LCI terms, an 'exceptional leader' to a 'medium capital leader' facing obstacles, but still capable of action. May's resilience after 2017 was a result of Brexit, the poor polling of her opponents and her unexpected poll strength, bolstered by the weakness of her internal challengers. Even a poorly positioned prime minister has considerable resources to call upon.

**Keywords:** Theresa May, prime minister, leadership capital, authority, Brexit

## Introduction

This article analysis Theresa May's changing leadership capital during the first two years of her premiership from her arrival in power until the final publication of her 'Chequers Agreement, her proposed solution to Brexit that led to her removal and stepping down a year later. Using the case of Theresa May, it examines how a leader gains, loses and conserves authority, and looks at what resources even a troubled and weak prime minister can use or draw upon to stay in office

Prime ministers are often presumed to be powerful. The sheer flexibility of the office of prime minister gives it a strong potential towards dominance. The Westminster system traditionally 'rewards highly individualistic, even heroic, masculinity in its leaders' (Sykes 2016, 176). Claims of over-mighty leaders have dogged several leaders since Walpole (in particular Thatcher and Blair) and such claims have increased in volume or been muted, depending on the incumbent (Langford 2006). Debate has centred on the extent to which leaders are truly dominant or actually constrained (Blick and Jones 2010). Such discussion often leads to a lack of nuance, as authority, skills and achievement are shaped by institutional location, relations and an incumbent's operating context (Laing and McCaffrie 2013). In certain situations, a leader can bring 'unity, direction and control', particularly when 'political capital and governing capacity are combined' (Weller 2018, 246). Yet they rarely do, and even the supposed dominance of long serving leaders such as Blair and Thatcher was episodic and temporary (Bennister and Worthy 2017).

The conduct of any prime minister is shaped by a bundle of political or personal assets, though they are not always either deployable or helpful (Helms 2017: Owen and Hargrove 2003). Given this, the abilities and capabilities of office are, in some senses, merely 'narrow strategic options' and 'the prime minister should be conceived of as a strategic actor operating within a strategically selective context' (Byrne and Theakston 2018, 9).

Context further shapes authority. Harold Wilson wrote of the 'unrealistic assumption that everything was static' for any one prime minister (1977, 23). Prime ministerial power is a 'contingent and moveable feast' shifting between and within premierships (Heffernan 2005, 615). One study of prime ministers since the 1970s concluded that most leaders, most of the time, have been reactive and 'battered by events' (Theakston 2013, 234). Premierships frequently 'zig zag' as successive leaders define themselves against their predecessor (Blick and Jones 2010). There is also 'variety within the life time of a single premiership', due to deliberate action or 'changed circumstances' (King 1991, 43). There can be 'shifts in style during particular tenures' with leaders such as Thatcher and Blair empowered or weakened at different points (Blick and Jones 2010, 123). Tony Blair complained that as prime minister you 'begin at your most popular and least capable and end at your least popular and most capable' (Heffernan 2005, 643).

This article will show that May's first two years in office are a striking example of just how much a single premiership can change, as her position went from dominance to defence in the space of ten months. Research has demonstrated how and why May became prime minister, utilising selectorate analysis (Jeffery et al 2017) and Stark's theoretical framework for choosing leaders (Quinn 2018). This article adds to the existing scholarship, presenting a

means of assessing May's dramatic time in office when she appeared capable of action, utilising the concept of leadership capital and applying the leadership capital index to May's time in office between July 2016 and July 2018 (Bennister, 't Hart and Worthy 2017). The article focuses on phases one and two when she seemed capable of action and initiative.

## **Leadership capital**

The Leadership Capital framework is used as a means of closely measuring authority over time, which captures both skills and context. The concept of leadership capital offers a way to understand the 'credit granted to leaders' and how it is 'accumulated, diminished and depleted' (Bennister et al 2017, 4). Rather than simply power, it is an 'aggregate of authority... or a leader's political resources' (Bennister et al 2015, 416- 418). It represents the 'aggregate of authority' that grants or limits a leader's 'room for manoeuvre or a 'warrant to lead' in a particular context (Bennister et al 2017, 3). Weller (2018, 23) has described it as the most developed process so far' for comparative analysis. Decline and diminishing returns are the normal trajectory as capital is depleted by defeats, mistakes and scandals. Some politicians, however, can rebuild it through electoral (or factional) victories and policy success (Breslauer 2002; Bennister et al 2017, 3).

The Leadership Capital Index (LCI) offers a combination of ten quantitative and qualitative indicators to evaluate leadership capital built around *skills*, *relations* and *reputation*. This soft constructivist approach seeks to capture the interplay between individual abilities, structural constraints and contextual conditions (Weller 2018; Burrett 2016). The LCI works best when examining single leaders or comparing leadership within single country political systems, and it carries the imprint of its Westminster origins (see Brown 2018; Helms 2016; Helms 2017). When applied across a wider series of country cases, leaders 'finding their voice' was found to be important in building capital, whereas a fall in personal or party polling or a sudden collapse in trust after a scandal or crisis quickly eroded it (Bennister et al 2017).

The LCI, developed by Bennister et al (2015, 2017) has been utilised as a comparative diagnostic tool for case study research. The concept of leadership capital and the operationalisation of the Index have been examined and critiqued by a range of scholars (see Weller 2018, Elgie 2015, Helms 2017 and Brown 2018). The Index is intended as a simple and parsimonious set of indicators that could both capture the interactive nature of leadership and be adapted to different systems. Bennister et al (2017) applied such an approach to a range of country cases studies which naturally involved some methodological compromises and trade-offs. Some indicators overlap, for instance polling ratings and trust, and others remain double-edged as, for example, experience in office can bring greater knowledge but also reinforce poor habits.

As Blondel (2017, 251-254) makes clear, the ten measures of the current LCI were left equally balanced for methodological reasons. Bennister et al (2017, 292) explain that there was an initial reluctance to include any weighting in the LCI, as it proved too challenging to justify which components were to be weighted and to what degree. Such fluidity has allowed the Index to be adapted to new case studies. Helms (2017) for example found that

communication skills so valued in Anglo-Saxon countries were less important in Germany, while Burrett (2016) applied the Index to Japanese leaders, testing its resilience in non-western contexts.. Similarly, the mixture of hard and soft measures, some static and others dynamic, offered different methodological approaches within a single index. Users of the LCI were advised to carefully triangulate sources or use valid techniques (such as cross-checks or ICR tests) to ensure reliability, especially for the softer measures (Bennister et al 2017, 14). Case studies on, for instance, Hungary, experimented with large number of data points, while an Italian study used expert surveys as a basis for some of the soft measures (Korosenyi et al 2017, Grimaldi 2017). The LCI remains a useful analytical tool and especially so in single country cases.

### **Measuring May's Premiership 2016-2018**

Theresa May's premiership presents a puzzle for the LCI to solve. Her time in office ran through three phases: the first was the dominant phase to June 2017, and the second a phase of retreat until the publication of her Chequers. The third phase constituted an 'unravelling' coda when, once May's project became public, her premiership was undermined by resignations, division and continual plots. The article focuses on phase 1 and 2, before May lost her room for manoeuvre in phase 3.

How did May survive in office after such an apparent steep capital loss? Application of the LCI suggests that the conventional media narrative was exaggerated: before the election May's capital was weaker than it appeared, and afterwards not quite as diminished as it seemed. Appendix 2 summarises the different levels of leadership capital for comparative purposes. Her continued survival speaks to the importance of institutional frameworks and contexts in protecting incumbents and preserving capital. Even a poorly positioned prime minister has considerable resources. May also utilised negative resources, when a 'constraint' can be 'successfully transformed into a positive resource' (Helms 2017, 6).

This article examines May's capital at a series of six key milestones in the first two years of her premiership between July 2016 and July 2018. The study covers the 10 months before and 11 months after May's election, bookended by her arrival in power in 2016, when she set to resolve Brexit, and the final publication of her first plan to solve it in 2018.

### **Table 1 about here**

For each milestone we gave a score based on quantitative data for the 'hard' measures and a cross section of qualitative sources for the 'soft' (see the table in Appendix 1). For those softer sources, a combination of academic analysis and biographies were drawn on. For consistency only IPSOS/Mori polling data was used. For variable 7, on trust, the lack of data meant polling over the success of the Brexit negotiations was added. The analysis is supported with comparison with recent UK prime ministers, to better contextualise May's actions. In the case of May, for example, her political vision and communication skills were mapped through

reliable well-evidenced sources, such as biographies, insider accounts and academic studies of the general election campaign (see Prince 2017, Shipman 2018, Ward and Wring 2018). Similarly, leadership challenge and parliamentary effectiveness drew on reliable accounts and academic studies of parliamentary dynamics and legislative agendas (Tierney 2018 and Tonge and Evans 2018).

### **Theresa May 2016-18**

May came to power as a takeover prime minister, inheriting the office through resignation rather than election (Worthy 2016). Takeovers lack capital building election wins and must often defend 'past policies' or 'solve problems created by previous decisions', which can drain authority and limit their room for manoeuvre (Weller 2018, 41). Recent takeovers such as Callaghan, Major and Brown have struggled with this combination of weak legitimacy and inherited problems (Worthy 2016).

May took over during one of the deepest crises of modern times, as the UK faced the consequences of its Brexit vote. This meant conducting hugely complex negotiations amid a series of rolling constitutional crises (de Mars et al 2018). Brexit deepened demographic and social divisions that left the UK 'polarised in terms of public opinion, [and] destabilised in terms of its territorial politics' (Jennings and Lodge 2018, 1). It appeared the ultimate 'wicked problem', with the political danger of absorption and failure tied with the policy danger that there was no clear solution that didn't involve potentially disruptive downsides, either political or economic (McConnell 2018).

Initially, May appeared to override these recurrent takeover problems. In her first, apparently dominant phase from July 2016 to June 2017 she enjoyed an extended honeymoon, with high personal approval ratings and a supportive press (Allen 2018). Though Ma took pains to distance herself from her only female predecessor, May followed Thatcher in adopting a personalised and presidential style, and pitched herself as an outsider and radical transformer (see King 2002: Kenny 2018). Her premiership began with a remaking of offices of state and a brutal sacking of her predecessor's allies (Allen 2017). Allen (2018) argues she could 'have joined the likes of Clement Attlee and Margaret Thatcher on the list of political weather-makers'. She chose a powerful, if high risk, strategy of political radicalism with a 'hard Brexit' that meant leaving the EU, Single Market and Customs Union (McConnell 2018).

Once in office and faced with implementing Brexit, it was widely assumed that May would conserve her leadership capital and she repeatedly committed to stay the length of her inherited tenure until 2020 (Allen 2018). Instead, 10 months later she called a sudden snap election, and few doubted a landslide (Bale and Webb 2018). Her gamble backfired spectacularly as the campaign was undermined by her increasingly poor performance, a misconceived strategy and a 'shallow' base of support (Mellon et al 2018). Thereafter, May's premiership came to resemble a retreat. May became boxed in by her party and commitment to a hard Brexit. On Brexit, her radicalism morphed into a 'semi-cautious balancing act' (McConnell 2018, 173). Her constant U-turns, shifts and changes made her appear not only to be governing against her own party, but to be contradicting her own commitments and

‘governing against herself’ (O’Malley and Murphy 2017, 131). If May’s first year invited comparisons with Margaret Thatcher, her second evoked John Major, James Callaghan or, most damaging of all, Neville Chamberlain.

After June 2017, May crossed a series of lines of political failure where her removal seemed inevitable. Her skills were in doubt, relations poor and her reputation reduced. She was a ‘fiasco prime minister’ with her time in office increasingly defined by a foreign policy disaster, part of a lineage of prime ministers embroiled in external trouble, stretching from Blair to Eden and back to Chamberlain (Brummer 2016). Domestically, she lost a parliamentary majority against a supposedly unelectable opposition leader, headed a dysfunctional party and was found wanting in many of the key facets of modern political leadership. She displayed none of the astuteness, statecraft or ‘skills in context’ a prime minister needs to survive (Owen and Hargrove 2003). She became a leader with ‘very limited strategic options’ and an even more limited lifespan (Byrne and Theakston 2018). Yet she remained in office, and in power until far beyond what many predicted. The puzzle is how and why.

The LCI analysis offers a slightly more nuanced picture than media narratives of strength and weakness would have it (see appendix 1 and 2). May in 2016-2017 went from being on the edge of an ‘exceptional leader’ to a ‘medium capital leader’, facing obstacles but still capable of action. However, May’s highest amount of capital in 2017, at 41, was still lower than Tony Blair’s a year and a half into his premiership in 1999 and only just above his in 2003 (Bennister and Worthy 2017). After October 2017, her capital then recovered slightly and began to drift upwards. Her recovery was, however, a fragile one. While Blair’s capital flowed from his communicative abilities, and Thatcher’s from her vision, May’s were based on the poor polling of her opponents and her own (surprising) polling resilience (Bennister and Worthy 2017). The details of each measure are mapped below.

## **1. Political/policy vision**

May began with an apparently clear policy vision with Brexit at its centre. She stated unequivocally that ‘Brexit means Brexit and we’re going to make a success out of it’ (Quinn 2018). Beyond Brexit, May-ism, a term May rejected, was a ‘mixture of social mobility and industrial relaunch’ that sat uneasily with ‘more socially conservative’ plans (Gamble 2017, 50). May’s ideology was balanced by her reputation for pragmatism (Prince 2017).

May was the second female prime minister of the UK and, like Thatcher, her pitch was as a woman and self-styled outsider taking on the ‘establishment’, encapsulated by her promise to ‘fight against burning injustice’ and govern ‘for the many’ (Allen 2018). In her October 2016 conference speech May publicly criticised the ‘liberal elite’ and ‘citizens of nowhere’ (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 3). She was the ‘Vicar’s daughter’, offering a moral, upright, middle class persona, imbued with the idea of ‘public service’, reminiscent of Gordon Brown’s ‘Son of the Manse’ or Thatcher’s ‘Grocer’s daughter’ (Smith 2008; King 2002). In the aftermath of the EU referendum, she was also the most prominent sign of how women, ‘excluded from referendum’, were then made ‘visible as actors in Brexit...to clean-up the mess left by their male counterparts’ (Hozic and True 2017, 270; Guerrina et al 2018). Sitting, somewhat uneasily, with this outsider style May emphasised her competence, having run the Home Office for 6 years, where she had developed an ‘authoritarian persona’ (Allen 2018a). Being

branded a 'bloody difficult woman' in the party leadership campaign helped shape perceptions of her abilities (Allen 2018; Prince 2017).

However, having been a rather reluctant remainer (albeit with a minimal public profile during the referendum campaign), she overrode any initial pragmatism when she called for a hard Brexit in October 2016 at her party conference and triggered article 50 in March 2017. These actions, intended to offer a radical solution and reassure Leave MPs, proved divisive. They were also miscalculations, as they pushed Remain voters towards Labour, while failing to build the winning coalition of Leavers she needed to prevail (Prosser et al 2017; Gamble 2018).

After June 2017, the core of May's vision and strategy came apart and she lacked any sort of 'tangible or credible storyline' required to bolster leadership capital (Bennister et al 2017, 284). Retreat and constructive ambiguity were used to hold together her party and government. Her later compromises on the Northern Ireland backstop in December 2017 and the Chequer's Agreement in July 2018 hinted at a softer Brexit (de Mars et al 2018). Government policy 'changed almost daily. It had to – Brexit can mean anything, and must keep as many factions as possible happy' (de Mars et al 2018, 21). By July 2018, no one was sure what May's vision of Brexit was, even after her Chequers plan was published. Elsewhere radicalism gave way to pragmatism, if not inaction, with domestic policies dropped or diluted (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). However, May was far from a visionary leader of the likes of Thatcher or Blair (King 2002). May had little vision beyond narrow and incremental policy shifts, hemmed in by the imperative of reaching a Brexit deal. May's reputation for pragmatism in fact counted against any visionary approach to enable supporters and the electorate to see beyond the constraints of Brexit.

## **2. Communicative performance**

More than most, May's was a rhetorical premiership, where speech-making became a key guide to her often opaque plans, especially on Brexit, where they were poured over for clues (Toye 2011; Grube 2012). Her set piece speeches, at conferences and famously at Lancaster house and then in Florence, were aimed at very different domestic and European audiences. The need to speak to different audiences simultaneously 'makes it makes it very difficult for leaders to be utterly forthright' (Kane and Patapan 2012, 50). The polarisation of Brexit made May's difficulty particularly acute, and one she was ill-suited to solve.

May had always been seen as a poor communicator. As Home Secretary and Prime Minister her 'submarine strategy' relied on occasional set-piece and heavily controlled media appearances (Shipman 2017). Her key Lancaster House speech, heavily trailed as a turning point, underwhelmed and revealed little new. Similarly, in her appearances at the House of Commons Liaison Committee May had 'mastered the art of saying nothing' (Balls 2017).

Nor was she any better at the softer side of being a 'good politician' (Clarke et al 2018). May's limitations were revealed in the snap election campaign, symbolised by her lecturing of a nurse that there was no 'magic money tree' (Ward and Wring 2017, 205). Her one-to-one interviews increasingly backfired due to her wooden delivery and tendency towards

repetition. The Guardian's John Crace likened May to a robot, the 'Maybot', a comparison that 'encapsulated her awkward, disengaged manner' (2017). As a woman, May also failed to find the (perhaps impossible) blend of masculinity and femininity needed, instead revealing seemingly old fashioned views about 'boys' and girls' jobs (Kenny 2018). Just as with Thatcher, her supposed image of 'self-confidence' gave way to a perception of 'intolerance, inflexibility and moralism' (Gardner 2011, 238).

After 2017, the previously supportive media spread rumours of her 'weakness', even speaking of her 'weeping' at moments of failure (Kenny 2018). The nadir came in her disastrous speech to conference in October 2017, when she was undermined by her own continuous coughing, a malfunctioning backdrop, and a prankster's stage invasion. This was despite a second, more successful, Brexit speech in Florence the month before that helped to re-start the stalled negotiations.

Communicative performance is often the key to successful capital building (Bennister et al 2017; Grube 2012). However, May's political strengths lay not with high rhetorical power (as with Tony Blair), but being the 'sensible, normal sounding voice of middle England' and so she was somewhat insulated from her poor skills (Prince 2017).

### **3. Personal poll rating relative to opposition (leader)**

Almost all prime ministers lose popularity and 'the trend is inexorably downward' (Denver and Garnett 2012, 71). Most leaders have had mostly negative ratings at the end of their tenure. As table 2 shows, May's arc of popularity was exceptional; beginning unusually high, her polling then went into a deep and steep decline. The closest modern comparator was Gordon Brown, who went from positive to deep minuses in the last few months of 2007 (Wells 2016).

May's initial polling boost as prime minister far outstripped other takeovers and was utilised to spearhead the 2017 election campaign (Ward and Wring 2017, 204). Her lead over Corbyn was huge in October 2016, when she committed to a 'hard Brexit' and triggered article 50. However, her mantra of 'strong (and) stable leadership in the national interest' was undermined by a poorly thought out manifesto, culminating in her 'U-turn' over the so-called 'dementia tax', when she promised a radical reform of social care and then reneged on it (Bale and Webb 2017).

#### **Table 2 about here**

Crucially, in the aftermath of the election, two patterns stabilised a dangerous situation. First, amid her own collapse the 'Corbyn bounce' was not sustained, while, second, May's own rating moved upwards slightly back to a relatively 'normal' negative score. Only in July 2018, as the Chequer's agreement collapsed and both Boris Johnson and David Davis resigned, did



May's approval drop again. Nevertheless, only much later, in March of 2019, did her ratings fall far below the average negative.

#### **4. Longevity: time in office**

Time in office can bring vital experience or reinforce poor behaviour (Bennister et al 2017). It can hone a leader's skills or induce delusions of grandeur and a bunker mentality (Heffernan 2005). Time can also bring achievement and Theakston (2013, 230) points to the 'correlation between tenure in office and prime-ministerial rankings...greatness and longevity in office usually go hand in hand'. Furthermore, Theakston and Gill (2011, 71) concluded that 'six years in office...seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for having an impact'.

Like other takeovers, May inhabited the same department for too long, and found it difficult to adapt or break habits (Helms 2018). She continued her secretive style of working, governing through a close, and closed, group of advisors, her 'Chiefs', Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill (Shipman 2017). After 2017, they were replaced with a new close knit group and a series of de facto-deputies. Even in July 2018, MPs continued to complain of May's 'bunker mentality' and habit of 'disregarding input from those outside her inner circle' (Dickson and Cooper 2018). Though all leaders tend to 'drift' towards isolation, context is crucial in shaping how much of a problem this becomes with their party.

But there were other signs of May learning. After June 2017, whether by choice or pressure, she appeared to learn some delegation and dexterity. She moved to quell instability by, for example, meeting with party factions to give them personal assurances, making speeches that temporarily squared circles, or retrospectively announcing collective responsibility had been (secretly) suspended. This meant May stayed in office amid great instability. Between June 2017 and July 2018. May lost 1 major minister every four months, and ended her two years with the loss of both the Foreign Secretary and Brexit Secretary.

#### **Table 3 about here**

May had developed enough skills and cultivated sufficient loyalty to survive a series of outright rebellions and the virtual collapse of cabinet government. May's time in office appears paradoxical, as she gained in experience yet remained tethered to modes of behaviour that limited her room for manoeuvre.

#### **5. (Re-)election margin for the party leadership**

May's exact route to the leadership was unusual. No other takeover leader in the last century had arrived in Downing Street directly from the Home Office (Worthy 2016). Her mandate, as with Gordon Brown's in 2007, was based on an internal party leadership among MPs. May's win was down to her reputation as a 'safe pair of hands' and perceived competence (Quinn

2019). Her gender played a role in clearing her path, as her final opponent Andrea Leadsom stepped down after her controversial remarks over motherhood (Smith 2017).

**Table 4 about here**

Yet she took over a deeply divided party, where around 170 Conservative MPs had supported Remain and 158 Leave (Lynch and Whitaker 2018). May was herself a 'somewhat reluctant Remainer' but received the votes of 150 Remainers and only 41 Leavers (Lynch and Whitaker 2018). As well as Brexit, voting was also influenced by liberal versus conservative issue splits, especially on same-sex marriage, a reform that May had led on as Home Secretary (Jeffrey et al 2017). In line with leadership elections for governing parties, and in contrast with opposition leaders, Quinn (2019) argues it was competence rather than electability that drove May's victory.

May's 'lopsided' parliamentary electoral base had two effects. First, like Gordon Brown, May's ascendancy to prime minister meant her electoral skills went 'untested' until the snap election campaign (Allen 2018; Quinn 2019). Second, it helped determine her actions. Her initial hard Brexit strategy was in part aimed at securing the confidence of Leavers. In her second post-election phase, her shifting strategy became fraught as divisions became more public. By June 2018 the party was badly and publicly divided, with Remainers and Leavers split over May's plans.

## **6. Party polling relative to most recent election result**

One general measure of leadership success or failure is whether a leader outpolls their own party, acting as a net vote winner or loser. However, the direction or even existence of causality between leader and party is unclear (Bartle and Crewe 2002; Clarke et al 2000). Party and leader evaluations interact but 'party leaders approval ratings fluctuate much more dramatically than parties' (Mughan 2015, 16). This is certainly the case with May. Her party's ratings rose, fell and stabilised like May's, but far less forcefully. From a lead of 9 points from the 2015 Conservative election victory, the party went from +18 in October 2016 to -2 by October 2017 before drifting slowly upwards to +1 by March 2018.

**Table 5 about here**

The Conservative polling resilience in 2017-2018 could have been due to the confusion of the UK's EU exit, polarisation of voting intentions or indeed Labour's tacit support for May's Brexit policy. Whatever the cause, the Conservative party's polling stability acted as a shield for May and discouraged the ERG in particular in seeking to challenge her leadership.

## **7. Levels of public trust in leader**

In the UK, 'evaluations of the Prime Minister...provide a powerful and easily used heuristic for determining if the government can be trusted' (Whiteley et al 2016, 238). Yet the UK is a low trust country, with a long term decline, punctuated by shifts around elections (Whiteley et al 2016). Trustworthiness was a strong part of May's appeal. May had long cultivated a reputation for blunt truth telling. In 2002 she warned her party it was perceived as a 'nasty' party, an act that helped portray May as a moderniser and a 'sincere' politician (Prince 2017). Her initial pitch as a 'safe pair of hands' and 'moral leader' was also based on trust (Wincott 2017 686).

However, from the limited trust data available, May had lost rather than gained trust compared with her predecessor. Under May's leadership 19% of the public in March 2017 and 17% in October 2017 felt 'leading Conservative politicians' told the truth most of the time, compared to a slightly better 24 % in July 2015 and 22% October 2015 under David Cameron (YouGov 2017). Her calling of a snap election after repeated promises not to itself 'neutered her potential assets of reliability and trustworthiness' (Tonge et al 2018, 3).

May's premiership, and confidence in it, was inextricably linked to Brexit. Prime ministers often shy away from 'personalised' policy initiatives, but May's 'Brexit means Brexit', along with Thatcher and the Poll Tax, or Blair over Northern Ireland and Iraq, are high profile exceptions (Kavanagh and Seldon 1999). The tracking of public confidence in the negotiations underscores May's personal failure (Stoker and Jennings 2017). In November 2016 a quarter of those polled felt negotiations were going 'well' or 'fairly well' with 46% believing it was going 'fairly' or 'very badly'. By July 2018, two-thirds felt negotiations were going badly or very badly with only 18 % believing it was going well.

### **Table 6 about here**

After June 2017, May was an untrusted prime minister in an untrustworthy context, failing on her central mission.

## **8. Likelihood of credible leadership challenge within next 6 months**

In the UK, outright 'deposition' of prime ministers is relatively rare, with Margaret Thatcher and Lloyd George isolated examples (Longford 2006: Quinn 2005). Party rules meant May could not face an outright challenge but only a confidence vote triggered by 48 letters to the 1922 committee (which she later did). There could be no 'stalking horse', and rivals could only 'fulminate' and destabilise her (King 1991, 29; Weller 2018).

One trigger for challenge and rivalry is removal, so prime ministerial appointment power is usually used carefully, with an eye to competitors, threats and party balance (King and Allen

2010). May initially ran against this tendency, sacking a swathe of her predecessor's colleagues, including the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne (Allen 2017). The move demonstrated simultaneously 'her acceptance of the Brexit referendum result, signalled a clear break with Cameron and served to consolidate her power base' (Allen 2017, 633). May also appointed her chief rival, Boris Johnson, to the Foreign Office, in a canny move intended to trap him into collective and individual responsibility (Allen 2018). May was also careful to balance Leave and Remainer ministers, appointing a trio of Leavers to head up the key 'Brexit' departments.

After the election, May was forced to sack her two 'Chiefs', Fiona Hill and Nick Timothy as MPs pointed the finger at her team in Number 10. Though stabilised by a new Chief of Staff Gavin Barwell, Cabinet factions leaked and counter-leaked while Boris Johnson made a series of overt attempts to control policy, if not directly oust May (Shipman 2017). Her re-shuffle of January 2018, spun as a major change, fell apart when key ministers refused to move and her claims in 2016 to promote more women also fell apart as they hit the 'concrete ceiling' of female representation (Smith 2018). Despite the dysfunction and rebellion, she was not forced, like Major, to fight and win a leadership election (Bennister and Heppell 2015). Nevertheless, like her predecessors, she appeared trapped 'in a downward spiral of bad publicity...and continued leadership speculation' (Norton and Cowley 1999, 61).

May was lucky in her internal opponents. Any 'serious challengers' must be senior, contenders and have a stock of parliamentary backing (Weller 2018, 44). While Johnson was a senior politician, his role in Brexit, his fading public popularity and perceived unreliability as Foreign Secretary undermined his support. This only changed once he resigned and became a far more potent challenge again in early 2019 managing to marshal Brexiteer forces in his favour, and going on to replace May in July 2019. Five months after the Chequers Agreement May did, in fact, face a formal attempt to remove her in December 2018, which she survived. The later vote demonstrated how the size of factions within the party precluded her removal; the hard Brexit group was large enough to trigger a party no confidence vote but too small to win one. Brexit, fear of the disruption and an unreliable successor helped keep her in place. Only in May 2019 did she finally agree to a departure date. Like Thatcher, it was finally a combination of backbench unease, expressed through the 1922 committee, and the men (and some women) in grey suits in Cabinet who ousted her, under the shadow of a resurgent Boris Johnson.

## **9. Perceived ability to shape party's policy platform**

Before June 2017, May championed a series of strongly personalised policies, including her industrial strategy and the creation of a wave of new grammar schools. May also pushed for a series of gender based policy reforms, including a radical overhaul of domestic violence law and used her office to display her feminist views symbolically, bringing an all-female advisory team to meet Donald Trump in January 2017 (Shipman 2017). The snap election campaign led to a series of rushed and poorly thought through new policies, including repealing the fox hunting ban and a radical reform of social care (Bale and Webb 2018).

After June 2017, key policies were dropped, partly because of the pressure on the parliamentary timetable and partly because of her supply and confidence agreement with the DUP. She had less control but retained some policy initiative, borrowing policy ideas from Labour on ending wage freezes and taxing energy companies. Her Home Office reputation turned on her, over the issue of police cuts and then the Windrush deportation scandal. Her championing of feminism also lost momentum, sitting uneasily with her alliance with the DUP, who supported restrictive abortion rights in Northern Ireland, and her close relationship to Donald Trump (Kenny 2018). Loss of policy drive was also due to chaotic ministerial turnover: May's priority area of housing had four ministers in two years (Freeguard 2018).

## **10. Perceived parliamentary effectiveness**

Theresa May, like Callaghan and Major, was forced to spend time with her party and in parliament (King 2015). May began with a majority of 17 but inherited an 'increasingly over the shoulder politics' of backbench rebellion, worsened by her party's deep splits on Brexit (Quinn 2018; King 1992, 231).

Between July 2016 and June 2017, May's government was undefeated in the House of Commons, in part because little legislation was passed (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). The government did begin the early legal post-referendum period relatively smoothly, despite predictions of logjams and wrecking, when it navigated the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017 in the space of two months, mainly because Labour voted to support it (Allen 2018).

Yet, any incremental progress was put at risk when May's snap election left the Conservatives without a majority, buoyed only by the 10 votes of the DUP on budget and Brexit votes (Tonge 2018). Between June 2017 and July 2018 May's minority government was defeated 13 times in the Commons and 30 times in the House of Lords. However, the 'brute Parliamentary arithmetic...has ended up imprisoning her and protecting her at the same time' (Waugh 2017). Despite concerns around the DUP's 'pivotal position', their support for Brexit and dislike of Corbyn made them a reliable partner (Tonge 2018).

Conservative backbenchers caused more concern (Tonge 2018). For May, as for Major, the problem came less with rebellions themselves, many of which were headed off or reduced, but with the perceptions of division and weakness they created (Heppell 2013). The government manipulated and bent various rules of parliamentary procedure to mitigate the effects of rebellion and opposition, stopping pairing, suspending collective responsibility in secret and abstaining on opposition day debates to prevent defeats (Huffington Post 2018). The government also 'under-legislated' and purposely avoided or dropped controversial legislation, creating a smaller target (Tiernay 2018).

## **Conclusions**

The LCI analysis tells how May's leadership capital during the first two years of her Premiership did diminish, but not as rapidly or deeply as many narratives would suggest. The narrative of 'dominance then defensiveness' hides a more nuanced picture of diminishing returns. Her early ascendancy masked her underlying weakness until the snap election campaign publicly exposed her leadership faults.

May's capital eroded in a particular fashion. Her communicative performance went only from average to poor, and her trust, given Brexit, simply flat lined throughout. Other leaders suffered in these areas because they dropped so far, so quickly, and so much was riding on them (see Bennister et al 2017). In disentangling the effects of personality from context, May was buoyed by a wider context of crisis, combined with the resilience of her own polling and her internal and external opponents' weaknesses (Bennister and Worthy 2017). Unlike Blair and Thatcher, once she began to lose capital she could not draw on her own personal political skills to rise above the chaos.

Nevertheless, the LCI also shows how a prime minister in extreme trouble can stay in post, for a period at least, even if in retreat, when certain fundamentals stay sound. Although supporters of May stressed her personal resilience after 2017, the stabilising of May's capital, at a lower level, was in part a result of the unique context she faced. Her falling poll ratings settled back into acceptable or average negative territory, while her party's ratings remained surprisingly stable. Corbyn's lack of a poll bounce further bolstered May's position. Cutting back on policy and legislation, by design or accident, helped head off rebellion and defeat. Even her lost majority worked to 'contain disloyalty' in key votes (Helms 2017, 9). Removal was unappealing, if not dangerous, especially with Johnson the obvious alternative.

The Brexit crisis makes May's premiership unique and uniquely difficult to assess. It was immensely destabilising, but also potentially papered over party and government cracks. May's premiership resembled a US president heading a divided government, and she was able to style herself in the 'permanently heroic' pose of a 'principled defender of all that is good, fighting an opposition bent on bringing the nation to ruin', pushing for Brexit against the establishment (Bailey 2002, 44). Brexit made May, even more than her predecessors, a rhetorical premier and she used her set-piece speeches to cajole, manoeuvre and persuade (Toye 2011).

May's blend of political weakness (regarding skills) and structural advantage (regarding incumbency) seems to have been underlined in the months following the publication of the Chequers Agreement. Her apparent solution was defeated three times in parliament in margins of historic proportions, and managed to gain a fraught and controversial extension (which she had publically committed to avoid). Her position was partly stabilised by vague commitments to stand down before the 2022 general election. Yet she remained in post – in office but not in power - and fought off a vote of no confidence in December 2018 and an attempt to change the rules on party leader removal in April 2019. It was only in May 2019, that she agreed, or was forced to agree, to a summer departure date and finally stepped down in July 2019.

May's survival can be seen as more luck than skill, based on her opponent's poor polling and framed by the uncertainty and intractable challenge of reconciling factions inside and outside the party to a Brexit compromise. May's endurance reminds us, however, that even a poorly positioned prime minister has considerable resources to call upon, and can survive because they are prime minister and no one else is.

## Bibliography

- Allen, N. (2017). Brexit, Butchery and Boris: Theresa May and Her First Cabinet. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 70(3), 633-644.
- Allen, N. (2018). 'Brexit means Brexit': Theresa May and post-referendum British politics. *British Politics*, 13(1), 105-120.
- Bailey, M.E. (2002) The Heroic Presidency in the Era of Divided Government, *Perspectives on Political Science*, 31:1, 35-45
- Bale, T., & Webb, P. (2018). 'We Didn't See it Coming': The Conservatives. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(1), 46-58.
- Balls, K (2018) Theresa May masters the art of saying nothing at Liaison Committee, 20/12/2017 <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2017/12/theresa-may-masters-the-art-of-saying-nothing-at-liaison-committee/>
- Bartle, J and Crewe, I (2002) 'The Impact of Party Leaders in Britain: Strong Assumptions, Weak Evidence.' In: King, A, (ed.) *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, pp.70 - 95
- Bennister, M, 't Hart, P. & Worthy, B. (2015): Assessing the Authority of Political Office-Holders: The Leadership Capital Index, *West European Politics*, 38 (3), 417-440
- Bennister, M., & Heppell, T. (2016). Comparing the dynamics of party leadership survival in Britain and Australia: Brown, Rudd and Gillard. *Government and Opposition*, 51(1), 134-159.
- Bennister, M., & Worthy, B. (2017). Limits to Dominance? In Bennister, M., Worthy, B., & Hart, P. T. (Eds.). *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*, Oxford: Oxford University Press pp121-144
- Bennister, M., Worthy, B., & Hart, P. T. (Eds.). (2017). *The leadership capital index: a new perspective on political leadership*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blick, A and Jones, GW (2010) *Premiership: The Development and Power of the Office of the British Prime Minister*, London: Imprint Academic.
- Blondel, J Measuring and Using Leadership Capital: Issues and Extension In Bennister, M., Worthy, B., & Hart, P. T. (Eds.). *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 250-263.
- Breslauer, G. W. (2002). *Gorbachev and Yeltsin as leaders*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, A. (2018) Leadership: 'not everything that counts can be counted'. *The Political Quarterly* [online first]

- Brummer, K. (2016). 'Fiasco prime ministers': leaders' beliefs and personality traits as possible causes for policy fiascos. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 23(5), 702-717.
- Burrett, T. (2016). Explaining Japan's revolving door premiership: Applying the leadership capital index. *Politics and Governance*, 4(2), 36-53.
- Byrne, C., & Theakston, K. (2018). Understanding the power of the prime minister: structure and agency in models of prime ministerial power. *British Politics*, 1-18.
- Clarke, H. D., Ho, K., & Stewart, M. C. (2000). Major's lesser (not minor) effects: prime ministerial approval and governing party support in Britain since 1979. *Electoral Studies*, 19(2-3), 255-273.
- Clarke, N., Jennings, W., Moss, J., & Stoker, G. (2018). *The good politician: folk theories, political interaction, and the rise of anti-politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cowley, P., & Kavanagh, D. (Eds) (2018). *The British General Election of 2017*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Cowley, P., & Norton, P. (1999). Rebels and rebellions: Conservative MPs in the 1992 Parliament. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1(1), 84-105.
- de Mars, Sylvia; Murray, Colin; O'Donoghue, Aoife; Warwick, Ben (2018). *Bordering two unions: Northern Ireland and Brexit*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Denver D. and Garnett M. (2012), 'The Popularity of Prime Ministers', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 14 (1): 57-73.
- Dickson and Cooper (2018). Theresa May's 'bunker mentality' Brexit, 7th September 2018
- Eoin O'Malley & Gary Murphy (2017) The leadership difference? Context and choice in Fianna Fáil's party leadership, *Irish Political Studies*, 32:1, 118-140
- Freeguard, G (2018) 'Why junior ministers—and their resignations—matter', *Prospect*, July 26, 2018
- Gamble, A. (2018). Taking back control: the political implications of Brexit. *Journal of European public policy*, 25(8), 1215-1232.
- Gardner, H. E. (2011). *Leading minds: An anatomy of leadership*. London: Hachette UK.
- Grube, D. (2012). Prime ministers and political narratives for policy change: Towards a heuristic. *Policy & Politics*, 40(4), 569-586.
- Guerrina, R., Exadaktylos, T., & Guerra, S. (2018). 'Gender, ownership and engagement during the European Union referendum: gendered frames and the reproduction of binaries'. *European Journal of Politics & Gender*, 1(3).
- Grimaldi, S The Leadership Capital of Italian Presidents: The Politics of Constraint and Moral Suasion In Bennister, M., Worthy, B., & Hart, P. T. (Eds.). *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*, Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 226-250
- Hargrove, E. C., & Owens, J. E. (2003). *Leadership in context*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Heath, O., & Goodwin, M. (2017). The 2017 general election, Brexit and the return to two-party politics: An aggregate-level analysis of the result. *The political quarterly*, 88(3), 345-358.



- Heffernan, R (2005) Exploring (and Explaining) the Prime Minister, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7 (4) pp 605-620.
- Helms, L. (2016). The politics of leadership capital in compound democracies: Inferences from the German case. *European Political Science Review*, 8(2), 285-310.
- Helms, L. (2017). When less is more: 'Negative resources' and the performance of presidents and prime ministers. *Politics*, 1-15 [online first] 0263395717738964.
- Helms, L. (2018). Heir Apparent Prime Ministers in Westminster Democracies: Promise and Performance. *Government and Opposition*, 1-23.
- Heppell, T., Crines, A., & Jeffery, D. (2017). The United Kingdom referendum on European Union membership: The voting of conservative parliamentarians. *JCMS*, 55(4), 762-778.
- Heppell, T. (2013). Prime Ministers and their parties in the United Kingdom. P. Strangio, P. 't Hart & J. Walter (Eds.), *Understanding Prime-Ministerial performance: comparative perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.129-149.
- Hojić, A. A., & True, J. (2017). Brexit as a scandal: gender and global trumpism. *Review of international political economy*, 24(2), 270-287.
- Huffington Post (2018) 'Pregnancy Pairing To Sick MPs Voting: 8 Ways The Tories Have Torn Up Parliament's Conventions', 20 July 2018
- IPSOS Mori (2016) *Political Monitor* (October) <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/political-monitor-archive>
- IPSOS Mori (2017) *Political Monitor* (March, July, October) <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/political-monitor-archive>
- IPSOS Mori (2018) *Political Monitor* (March, July) <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/political-monitor-archive>
- Jeffery, D., Heppell, T. Hayton, R. Crines, A. (2018) 'The Conservative Party Leadership Election of 2016: An Analysis of the Voting Motivations of Conservative Parliamentarians' *Parliamentary Affairs* (2018) 71, 263-282.
- Jennings, W., & Lodge, M. (2018). Brexit, the tides and Canute: the fracturing politics of the British state. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 1-18.
- Kane, J., & Patapan, H. (2012). *The democratic leader: How democracy defines, empowers and limits its leaders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kavanagh, D., & Seldon, A. (1999). *The powers behind the prime minister. The Hidden Influence of Number Ten*.
- Keller, J. W. (2005). Constraint respecters, constraint challengers, and crisis decision making in democracies: A case study analysis of Kennedy versus Reagan. *Political Psychology*, 26(6), 835-867.
- Kenny, M (2018) 'From Thatcher to May and beyond: women in British politics' in Allen, N and Bartle, J (2018) *None Past The Post*. Manchester, MUP pp xx
- King, A. (1991). The British Prime Ministership in the age of the career politician. *West European Politics*, 14(2), 25-47.

- King, A. (1993). The implications of one-party government. King, A. S. (Ed.). (1993) *Britain at the Polls 1992*, London, Chatham House Pub.pp223-48.
- King, A. (2002). The outsider as political leader: The case of Margaret Thatcher. *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(3), 435-454.
- King, A. and Allen (2010) 'Off With Their Heads': British Prime Ministers and the Power to Dismiss *British Journal of Political Science*, 40 (2), 249-278
- Körösényi, A., Ondré, P., & Hajdú, A. (2017). A 'Meteoric' Career in Hungarian Politics. In Bennister, M., Worthy, B., & Hart, P. T. (Eds.). *The Leadership Capital Index: A New Perspective on Political Leadership*, Oxford: Oxford University Press pp 82-101.
- Laing, M., & McCaffrie, B. (2013). The politics prime ministers make: Political time and executive leadership in westminster systems in *P. Strangio, P't Hart and J. Walter (Eds.), Understanding Prime Ministerial Performance*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 79-101.
- Langford, P. (2006). Prime Ministers and Parliaments: The Long View, Walpole to Blair. *Parliamentary History*, 25(3), 382-394.
- Lynch, P., & Whitaker, R. (2018). All Brexiteers now? Brexit, the Conservatives and party change. *British Politics*, 13(1), 31-47.
- McConnell, A. (2018). Rethinking wicked problems as political problems and policy problems. *Policy & Politics*, 46(1), 165-180.
- Mellon, J., Evans, G., Fieldhouse, E., Green, J., & Prosser, C. (2018). Brexit or Corbyn? Campaign and Inter-Election Vote Switching in the 2017 UK General Election. *Parliamentary Affairs* 4(1), 719-737
- Mughan, A. (2015). Parties, conditionality and leader effects in parliamentary elections. *Party Politics*, 21(1), 28-39.
- Müller-Rommel, F., & Vercesi, M. (2017). Prime ministerial careers in the European Union: does gender make a difference? *European Politics and Society*, 18(2), 245-262.
- Prince, R. (2017). *Theresa May: The Enigmatic Prime Minister*. London: Biteback Publishing.
- Quinn, T. (2018). The Conservative Party's leadership election of 2016: choosing a leader in government. *British Politics*, 1-23.
- S. Tierney, 'The Legislative Supremacy of Government', *U.K. Const. L. Blog*, 3rd Jul. 2018
- Shipman, T. (2017). *Fall out: a year of political Mayhem*. London: HarperCollins UK.
- Smith, A. (2008). 'New man' or 'son of the manse'? Gordon Brown as a reluctant celebrity father. *British Politics*, 3(4), 556-575.
- Smith, J. C. (2017). Politics and parenthood: an examination of UK party leadership elections. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(1), 196-217.
- Smith, J. C. (2018). The optics of a cabinet reshuffle: PR vs reality, *OUP Blog* 10 Feb 2018 <https://blog.oup.com/2018/02/cabinet-reshuffle-diversity/>
- Sykes, P. L. (2016). Women's Executive Leadership. *Government and Opposition*, 51(1), 160-181.

Theakston, K 'Political Skills and Context in Prime Ministerial Leadership in Britain' Hargrove, E. C., & Owens, J. E. (2003). *Leadership in context*. Rowman & Littlefield, pp 89-131.

Theakston, K. (2013) 'Evaluating Prime-Ministerial Performance: The British Experience', in: Paul Strangio, Paul t'Hart and James Walter (eds.) *Prime Ministerial Leadership: Power, Party and Performance in Westminster Systems*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp 221-241.

Theakston, K., & Gill, M. (2011). The postwar premiership league. *The Political Quarterly*, 82(1), 67-80.

Tonge, J., & Evans, J. (2018). Northern Ireland: Double Triumph for the Democratic Unionist Party. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(1), 139-154.

Toye, R. (2011). The rhetorical premiership: A new perspective on prime ministerial power since 1945. *Parliamentary History*, 30(2), 175-192.

Ward, S., & Wring, D. (2018). Out with the Old, In with the New? The Media Campaign. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 71(1), 203-221.

Wagh, P (2018) The five things you need to know on Wednesday, July 17 2018

Weller, P. (2018). *The Prime Ministers' Craft: Why Some Succeed and Others Fail in Westminster Systems*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wells, A (2016) Leadership honeymoons and ICMs latest poll  
<http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/9740> , 28 July 2016

WhatUKThinks (2018) How well or badly do you think the government are doing at negotiating Britain's exit from the EU? <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/how-well-or-badly-do-you-the-government-are-doing-at-negotiating-britains-exit-from-the-eu/>

Whiteley, P., Clarke, H. D., Sanders, D., & Stewart, M. (2016). Why do voters lose trust in governments? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18(1), 234-254.

Worthy, B. (2016). Ending in failure? The performance of 'takeover' prime ministers 1916–2016. *The Political Quarterly*, 87(4), 509-517.

YouGov (2017) Tracker: How much do you trust the following to tell the truth?

**Appendix 1 here**

**Appendix 2 here**



